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ABSTRACT

Listening requires a great awareness of self, words, facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and eye contact. This article examines the importance of these factors in the development of the therapeutic relationship. Among some of the characteristics of effective listening treated here are qualities within the client/therapist relationship, therapist responsibility and assumptions, which include self-knowledge and risk taking, and client responsibilities. In the client/therapist relationship, the elements of trust, empathy, and respect are essential; good listening skills can enhance these aspects of therapeutic interchange. The therapist must pay special attention to such things as self-knowledge, knowledge of non-verbal communication, development of trust, guiding clients through the counseling process, and confrontation skills. The therapist must also be able to resist the urge to force the client to change lest he or she miss hearing why the client's present condition exists. Likewise, the therapist should avoid assuming that he or she knows the feelings and thoughts of the client, and should refrain from predicting a client's response. Therapists should work to develop tactics for redefining client resistance and encouraging clients to explore their pain. Listening involves more than just hearing, it also requires hearing, seeing, expressing, and feeling. (RJM)

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# Listening Skills for the Helping Profession

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**Running head: LISTENING SKILLS FOR THE HELPING PROFESSION**



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Abstract

This article examines the importance of listening skills in the development of the therapeutic relationship. Several characteristics of the therapeutic relationship are discussed which are important to the process and the progress of the relationship. Much responsibility is placed on the role of the therapist including personal development and knowledge of techniques that are critical to the therapeutic listening process. An awareness of assumptions most commonly made by the therapist are also discussed as well as the responsibilities of the client within the relationship. Research was mainly obtained using a wide variety of books along with the consultation of persons in the helping professions. Listening is a well overlooked component of the therapeutic process that is often taken for granted. Emphasis and awareness of listening skills need to be further addressed by the helping professions.

# Listening Skills For The Helping Professions

## Introduction

Listening is a complex skill which involves more than simply hearing. Listening is a process that needs to be understood from all aspects in order to be performed in a highly successful manner. There are a number of specific factors that affect the quality of the listening process, several of which will be discussed in this paper. Among these are necessary qualities within the client/therapist relationship, therapist responsibility and assumptions, including self knowledge and risk taking, and client responsibilities.

Worthy of special mention is the role of trust which will be discussed throughout. Trust plays a major role in the listening process. Since trust is essential to an effective counseling relationship, the therapist must be careful not to behave in a manner which creates doubt. If the therapist does not possess and exhibit good listening skills, the client will notice the inconsistencies and lose trust in the relationship, most likely causing its failure.

The terms therapist/client are used throughout the paper. While the issues discussed are clearly relevant to the therapist/client relationship, they also apply to any helping relationship which has effective change as a goal.

## Client/Therapist Relationship

Trust, empathy, and respect are three major aspects of the client/therapist relationship in which good listening skills play an essential role. A therapist must provide an atmosphere which includes a caring and respectful attitude toward the client, and one in which honesty and genuineness are possible. This atmosphere is created non-verbally as well as verbally. Listening accurately provides the information the therapist needs to respond verbally to the client. Some focus is also placed on the therapist's awareness of the self, and the non-verbal messages being expressed in order

to convey a trusting, respectful and understanding atmosphere to the client.

Trust

The establishment of trust is essential to the success of the therapeutic relationship. Trust grows in an atmosphere in which the client feels heard and understood by the listener. When the client feels the trust growing with the therapist, resistance to the therapeutic process begins to dissolve. The client begins to feel safe enough to reveal a deeper layer of their being. Resistance, as a concept, is rarely negative. From either the client's or the therapist's perspective, it provides needed protection. When there is a great deal of resistance, it may be an indication of a low trust level within the relationship. The therapist may then need to focus on the effectiveness of their listening skills. The development of trust will be discussed later.

Empathy

From the client's perspective it is one thing to be heard, but quite another to be heard empathetically. Several authors (Banville, 1978; Barbara, 1958; Corey, 1990) believe that empathy occurs when the therapist is able to enter into the emotional world of the client and share with the client this understanding. Therapists must also be able to return to their own state of being and avoid getting lost in the client's emotions. The therapist is then able to truly assist the client in further exploration. For example, a client describes the pain felt from a traumatic experience. The therapist is able to feel with the client that pain to an extent that the therapist can truly understand and verbally convey that understanding back to the client. The empathy expressed by the therapist is essential in the relationship in order to show understanding to the client. The client needs to feel understood. When accurate empathy is expressed, a stronger bond is made between the therapist and the client, allowing a deeper sense of trust.

Respect

Listening well is the most basic way to show respect for another. Since respect plays a major role in the success of the relationship, both the client and the therapist need to work together to build and show respect within the relationship. This may be difficult for the client to do, particularly if there has been a lack of respect experienced in other significant relationships. However, the therapist can do much to teach the client how to show respect, by both verbal and behavioral examples. Respect can be shown through attentiveness, genuineness, understanding, and by attempting not to be judgmental at any time. Also, an attitude of acceptance through eye contact and verbal response can elicit a sense of respect, one for the other (Barbara, 1958; Young, 1992). If the client has never experienced respect through any of these means, the therapist can discuss how respect can be transmitted and read through non-verbal means.

The client needs to be understood and awaits feedback from the therapist to prove that the therapist has really heard and understood. The therapist's ability to listen can convey to the client that he/she has been heard. This entails processing the information heard and expressing what the client was saying and feeling in the therapist's own words (Martin, 1983; Nichols & Stevens, 1957). Providing an understanding atmosphere will strengthen the bond of trust within the relationship, allowing for further exploration and growth for the client.

## Therapist's Responsibilities

The therapist has many responsibilities in the listening process. These responsibilities include self-knowledge, knowledge of non-verbal communication and the characteristics of the active listening process, development of trust, guiding the counseling process, and confrontation skills. Emphasis needs to be placed on methods to improve listening skills.

Pursuing Self Knowledge

Two important methods to the therapist are continually increasing self-awareness and working on personal issues. Self knowledge is necessary for continued growth. A therapist needs to know what issues will evoke what particular feelings, since feelings affect the therapist's ability to listen and respond effectively. The therapist must be prepared to hear and accept, objectively and non-judgementally, whatever a client may share (Nichols & Stevens, 1957). A client may share issues which the therapist may not have explored within him or herself. If the therapist reacts judgementally, this may shatter what trust has already been established and prevent further trust from developing. Therefore, it is necessary for a therapist to do his or her own work and know where he or she stands on a particular issue when it occurs in the context of a counseling relationship.

Expressing Non-verbals

It is also important throughout the therapist's self-discovery to take time to focus on one's own non-verbal messages. The client will judge how accurately the therapist is listening and hears his or her message, as non-verbal cues are more powerful than the spoken word. The therapist needs to be aware of his or her feelings that may surface subconsciously through facial expression, body language, and verbal tone (Weaver, 1972). Congruency between non-verbals and words is necessary in order to avoid sending confusing messages to the client.

Promoting Characteristics of the Active Listening Process

Meier and Davis (1993) discuss several characteristics that may enhance the active listening process of the relationship. These include developing trust, which was discussed earlier but will be elaborated upon in the following paragraph, explaining the therapist's role, and guiding the counseling process. The therapist also needs to listen actively so that the client knows he or she is being heard and understood (Corey & Corey, 1993). Starting the relationship out on the right foot can be vital to

what is to follow. First impressions are a powerful tool in the beginning process and carry through to the latter stages of the counseling relationship. Therefore, being aware of and utilizing certain active listening techniques can enhance the relationship.

Developing Trust

The first characteristic to be discussed is the establishment of trust. To increase trust in the relationship the therapist should develop a working alliance with the client by inviting, not forcing, the client to participate. This extends respect to the client by allowing the client the decision to participate. This may be done by letting the client lead the conversation, while the therapist demonstrates attentive listening skills. The initiation of discussion by the client of issues pertinent to his or her own needs is important. The therapist must convey to the client that it is appropriate to introduce the dialogue for the session. The client must be able to express and discuss issues, for this is pertinent to the process of the therapy and essential to the client. The therapist may also give more than "yes/no" responses which will allow the client to give more of themselves to the relationship. Finally, the therapist needs to trust the therapy process enough to believe that what is pertinent to the client's growth will be introduced by the client at the appropriate time in the therapeutic alliance.

Explaining the Therapist's Role

In the relationship, the role of the therapist may be explained to the client in an effort to prevent confusion that could evoke anxiety in the client. Letting the client know that the therapist is there to help by sharing knowledge and information and not by making decisions for the client, hastens the therapeutic process. Sharing this information also enables the client to understand the importance of the therapist's role of active listening.

Guiding the Counseling Process

There are a number of factors involved in guiding the counseling process. Four of these will

be discussed including pacing and leading, minimal encouragers, silence, and confrontation skills. These issues may occur at any point in the counseling relationship, and are not relegated to any specific sequence. A skilled therapist will not feel constrained to follow any set patterns of counseling techniques, but will feel free and comfortable in choosing a system appropriate for each individual client. What remains constant for success with each factor is the necessity for active listening to occur. Without active listening, the therapist will miss vital clues which speak to timing and when to effectively make an intervention.

1. Flexibility in pacing and leading can assist the client through the counseling process. Pacing and leading refers to how much direction the therapist exerts. Pacing means following the client's selection of content and feeling (Benjamin, 1987). It is restating the client's concerns just as it was expressed with nothing else added. This is a technique that is used to let the client know that they are being heard and understood. Leading should occur only when the therapist has developed a strong rapport with the client. Leading is an introduction of a new message by the therapist to the client based on the information already presented by the client and gained by the therapist through active listening. There is great importance to timing when using the leading technique. The therapist needs to develop a sense of when to provide some direction in the process so that it will help, not hinder, that process.

2. It is sometimes necessary for a therapist to reassure a client in a brief fashion. This can be done by using minimal encouragers. Minimal encouragers are verbal messages such as "uh-huh" and non-verbal messages such as nodding. When used effectively, these brief acknowledgements can be beneficial to clients in encouraging them to explore their own issues without interruptions from the therapist.

3. When a therapist doesn't know what to say, it is often best to say nothing. However,

silence can seem awkward both to the therapist and to the client. It is the therapist's job, through self exploration and growth, to develop a level of comfort with silence, and also to develop an atmosphere within the counseling relationship where silence is comfortable for the client. One of the most effective means is for the therapist to assist the client, after a period of silence, in revealing their feelings about silence and its personal meaning to them. This is a valuable exercise since silence can have many meanings.

4. Confrontation, used cautiously, can be a valuable tool in the process of the relationship. It has already been pointed out that the therapist needs to be supportive and understanding throughout the relationship in order to establish trust. Once the trust is established, a therapist may have the freedom to confront a client in a constructive, nonthreatening manner. This does not mean that the therapist does not agree or opposes what the client has shared. It means pointing out any discrepancies or inconsistencies that may have been expressed by the client (Corey, 1990). Confrontation is most effective once a bond of trust has been established. Then it can help to establish motivation in the client in order for movement toward change to occur.

## Therapist's Assumptions

Meier and Davis (1993) discuss many assumptions that therapists may make during the counseling relationship. These not only may interfere with the counseling process as a whole, but most especially with the therapist's ability to listen effectively. Several of the most common assumptions will be explored. These include issues pertaining to client change, knowing the client's feelings, predicting, and viewing resistance and the expression of pain as negative.

### Forcing Client Change

A common error made by therapists is attempting to talk the client into change. While involved in this process, therapists often miss hearing what is preventing the client from being able to

make necessary changes. Clients often have behind them a lengthy experience of behaving in one specific way. The decision to change is a major turning point for a client. In order for clients to make this decision, they need be aware that there are a variety of options available to them, and that each carry rewards and consequences. Change not only affects clients, but their environment as well, including friends and family.

The mere idea of change can be quite frightening for clients. Being able to verbalize these feelings to an empathetic listener is important to the therapeutic process. It takes a great deal of evaluating and self-searching to even attempt the thought of changing. It is also important that therapists not ask clients to give up or let go of anything until they have established something to replace what will be given up. For example, the therapist should not suggest to a client to give up compulsive shopping until a plan has been worked out to fill the time void that the compulsion once occupied. Without an outlet of constructive and self rewarding behavior to replace the destructive aspects of compulsive shopping, the client would be in a situation destined to failure which may likely result in more significant emotional damage.

Knowing Client's Feelings

A therapist often makes the mistake of assuming that he or she knows and understands the feelings and thoughts of the client. It is necessary for the therapist to listen carefully and then to check assumptions by questioning and exploring information with the client. An important time for a therapist to remain tentative is when forming an opinion regarding the meaning of the client's expression. Verification of any assumption can be accomplished with the client.

Predicting Client's Response

A therapist may also try to predict how a client will respond or react to a given situation. Reaction is not universal. Each client has a unique perception and interpretation to life. It is

important that the therapist avoid expectation and be prepared for any type of response from the client. If a therapist acts on an expectation instead of checking with the client, the client may attempt to comply with the therapist's expectation. The therapist has in essence set up an expectation which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for and with the collusion of the client. In other words, the client complies with what he or she believes is the therapist's expectation. While the uncertainty of not being able to predict may be unnerving for the therapist at times, learning to trust one's ability to handle what occurs in the "here and now" is a critical skill. It is a skill which also keeps the therapist actively listening in the present instead of attempting to predict how the client will respond.

Redefining Resistance

Resistance and its cause can often be identified by the therapist through skillful listening. Once identified, resistance is frequently seen by the therapist as a negative aspect of the therapeutic relationship which only impedes the client's progress. However, resistance should not be viewed as all bad. The therapist should be cautious in attempting to break down a client's resistance, for resistance is often the only available avenue of defense for the client (Corey, 1990). If a therapist tries to force through a client's resistance, the client may further withdraw. A great deal of fear may be evoked within the client which could jeopardize the therapeutic relationship. A skilled therapist is able to engage the client in working with the resistance, thus fostering the ability of the client to gradually express the fears, and to be choiceful about giving up the resistance.

Working with resistance might occur when the therapist invites the client to explore the underlying causes of the resistance. This points out to the client the obvious fact that he or she has a choice in the relationship, and also a responsibility for its ultimate outcome. Listening carefully then becomes essential if the therapist is to facilitate a successful resolution for the client.

Encouraging Client's Pain

Like resistance, a client's pain can be identified by skillful listening. Often, it is what is implied by the client, more than what is actually said, that notifies the therapist of pain's presence. Deep emotional pain is often masked. Therapists may also make the mistake of believing that emotional pain and tears are negative and of attempting to alleviate them. The expression of emotional hurt is often necessary in order for a client to heal, as well as to experience a full range of human feeling. If the client does not experience and express emotional pain, how can the client truly appreciate the fulfillment of emotional joy? Tears are essential to all human beings. They are an emotional outlet and can be seen as a release, or a cleansing of the pain. They may also be symbols of the words that clients cannot find to express how they are feeling. For example, a client may avoid dealing with a particular issue. Each time an attempt is made to discuss the issue, the client becomes frustrated with the inability to find the words to describe what he or she is feeling and begins to cry. The tears act as a release as well as a symbol of the frustration. This release of tears is a crucial moment for the client, as finally the emotions that had been pent up for a prolonged period of time are vented. When the client calms and the tears slow, enough time and thought may have passed for the client to find words for the feelings.

A therapist, therefore, must not assume that to relieve a client's pain is an appropriate goal. The pain belongs to the client and only the client can decide how to deal with it. A therapist can encourage and assist the client in exploring their pain, and in helping them to develop options for this process. Pain is a part of the shared journey between a client and therapist, with the therapist's most effective tool being the ability to listen empathetically.

## Client's Responsibilities

The client has responsibilities in the relationship, just as the therapist does. These

responsibilities include the willingness to work on issues, entertain the idea of new behaviors within the counseling setting, and possibly decide to use th se new behaviors to attempt change outside of the therapeutic relationship. But first the client must be willing to listen to the feedback of the therapist. This is the first step for the client in showing willingness to work on their issues. Clients must demonstrate this willingness by entering a relationship with the therapist, and a relationship implies an exchange. Most clients enter into the relationship with some idea that an effort must be made on their part, but feel unsure as to what is expected of them and how the therapeutic process works. Most do not understand, for example, that the relationship with the therapist is a model of what an effective relationship should be. If the client does not work, remains silent and uncooperative, or demonstrates an unwillingness for an exchange to occur, there will be no progress in the relationship. It is necessary for the client to be open to new ideas and behaviors. A client needs to explore thoughts and feelings to increase awareness. Sharing this awareness and being willing to listen to the therapist's reflections can enhance the trust in the relationship and increase an understanding of the self.

Clients must be willing to entertain change (Corey, 1990). Often, changing an attitude or behavior can be the very thing that resolves an issue for the client. It must be remembered that change is frightening and takes much motivation and courage to attempt. A client needs to be open to the experience of therapy and willing to share their perception of what is happening with the therapist. The therapist, having accurately and empathetically listened to the client's perceptions, may then provide the necessary support for change to occur.

## Summary

Listening is more than just an auditory function. It is more than what is actually being verbally communicated. Seeing and accepting, not judging what is expressed, is listening. Listening

requires a great awareness of the self, internally and externally, of words, facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and eye contact. Listening is not the act of hearing alone, it is a combination of hearing, seeing, expressing and feeling. The process of listening is of such significance that it can be termed a cornerstone of an effective helping relationship.

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